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EXCLUSIVE CIA OFFICIAL LINKED TO IRAN SCANDAL FORCED TO RETIRE
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WASHINGTON

CIA counterterrorism chief Duane Clarridge, a figure in the Iran-Contra affair, is among a handful of agency officials being forced into retirement as part of a 'housecleaning' by new spy chief William Webster, according to U.S. intelligence sources.

The sources told United Press International that Webster and other senior CIA officials were 'dissatisfied' with Clarridge's lack of candor in his 1984 and 1986 testimony before the House and Senate intelligence committees about the agency's role in Central America.

One source said that parts of Clarridge's testimony, on subjects including the agency's mining of Nicaragua's harbors and a CIA manual encouraging the assassination of Sandinista village officials 'were found in-house not to be accurate.'

The sources described the shakeup as both a typical shuffle by a new agency director and a 'housecleaning following a scandal,' in which employees who had been deceitful or misleading in congressional testimony will be asked to leave.

While Webster was FBI director last year, bureau officials also found Clarridge to be less than forthright during a criminal investigation into an alleged presidential assassination threat by a former CIA employee, Jack Terrell, the sources told UPI.

FBI officials suspected Clarridge was seeking to protect former CIA employees, including some who had worked for him, who were associated with Terrell in one of several private efforts to assist the Nicaraguan Contra rebels, the sources said.

It could not be learned precisely when Clarridge, who appeared before the congressional Iran-Contra committees in early August, was asked to take early retirement, but sources said several other CIA employees are expected to similarly be pressed to step down.

Clarridge could not be reached for comment. A CIA spokesperson declined to acknowledge he ever worked for the agency, although transcripts of his recent closed-door testimony have been made public.

It was during the investigation of Terrell, sources said, that Webster and other FBI officials began to focus on Clarridge's Central American role.

Terrell, a disaffected member of the private Civilian Military Assistance group, was one of the first to publicly accuse national security aide Oliver North of managing a private Contra aid network. The CMA was a spinoff of the primary network overseen by North, an operation run by retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard Secord.

Some intelligence sources alleged, as has Terrell, that the joint 1986 FBI-Secret Service inquiry was initiated to discredit him and that the only evidence to trigger the investigation was a second-hand remark in an intercepted telephone call.

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A Justice Department source said that although the assassination investigation "didn't pan out" during the inquiry, Webster first learned of "North ... Clarridge -- the grey area" in the U.S. government that was supporting the Contras and the CMA group.

At the time, Congress had banned U.S. officials from providing military aid to the Contras.

One source said that, at the FBI's request, Clarridge gave investigators a "heavily deleted file" on Terrell's former associates, saying that he had provided all available materials.

But other CIA employees tipped the Justice Department that "another file existed which was the real thing," a knowledgeable source said. Armed with the file number, FBI agents returned to the CIA asking to see the material, the source said. The CIA refused, according to the source, replying, "We'll see you in court."

Sources said FBI officials felt Clarridge was acting under orders from CIA Director William Casey in withholding the files.

The FBI dropped its pursuit of the matter because "its real mission was to neutralize Terrell, not uncover what the agency was doing." Once it had been determined Terrell was not a threat to the president, the inquiry was dropped.

Reports conflicts on how the Terrell investigation was triggered.

An intelligence source said the FBI intercepted a phone call from Central America to the Honduran embassy in Washington in which one of those on the line described him as dangerous.

"The basic thrust was, 'He's coming to Washington and he's such a crazy guy he could probably shoot the president,'" the source said.

When the bureau alerted the Secret Service, the source said, the presidential security force "really wanted to jump on the guy."

But National Security Council documents released by the Iran-Contra committees last week suggested that North may have asked the FBI to investigate Terrell, after receiving reports that he was "dangerous" from members of a pro-Contra group. The memos showed that North was kept apprised of the inquiry. In one memo, national security adviser John Poindexter even informed President Reagan about Terrell's "offer to assassinate the president."

Robert White, former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador and Paraguay who now employs Terrell at a liberal, non-profit think tank based in Washington, has charged the investigation was started solely "to blacken Terrell's name because they were extremely worried about his testimony."

In a twist of fate, Webster became CIA director two months ago.

"When Webster came in and started to clean house, there was no choice but to say, 'Take early retirement,'" a source in the Justice Department said.

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In Poindexter's private congressional testimony, released Thursday, he alleged that Clarridge knew of North's pro-Contra activities. North has testified that Clarridge occasionally advised him. Clarridge has denied any awareness of details of North's pro-Contra activities.

In 1978, when members of the CIA station in Turkey were expelled because of frictions, Clarridge was sent in "to pick up the pieces" and succeeded, one colleague said.

One Justice Department source identified Clarridge as the "mastermind" behind the mining of Nicaragua's harbors in 1984.